Social and Political Criticism: The Reformulation of the Myth of Antigone in Franklin Domínguez’s Antígona-Humor

Martha Bátiz Zuk

As its title suggests, Antígona-Humor is a comedy. Dominican playwright Franklin Domínguez, who is “an assiduous writer of comedies and political satires” (William García 19), wrote this two-act play at a time when his country’s internal struggles had led to a particularly unstable and volatile political situation. Unlike other Latin American playwrights who, in their own versions of Antigone, directly engage with the original myth by respecting its main plot or, at the very least, its tragic tone, Domínguez chose not only to create his own homegrown plot, but also to subvert the genre of Sophocles's Antigone and even relegate Antigone's story to the background. In so doing, he managed to construct his own story, related to the original text through a meta-theatrical ploy that allowed him to increase the level of criticism the text makes of middle-class society in his country.

García claims that the play “parece ser un claro ejemplo de teatro comercial, una comedia que retrata y exalta la familia burguesa, a la vez que aconseja al público sobre cómo proteger tal institución social” (21) (seems to be a clear example of commercial theatre, a comedy that portrays and exalts the bourgeois family, while at the same time advising the audience on how to protect this social institution). My analysis here is based on a premise contrary to García’s assertion. Daniel Zalacaín suggests that Domínguez is considered “el dramaturgo de la historia” (the historian playwright), and the dramatist himself has declared his interest in “reflejar las situaciones políticas y sociales de la República Dominicana en determinado momento” (110) (reflecting the political and social situations of the Dominican Republic at a particular moment). In this essay I seek to demonstrate that Domínguez’s intention with this play goes further than offering a pleasant and well-orchestrated moral
tale, and that his profound knowledge of Dominican idiosyncrasies and
the weaknesses of its bourgeoisie is evident in the creation and
development of the characters in his ostensibly apolitical Antígona. My
suggestion is that, like a modest Caribbean Molière, Domínguez exposes
and satirizes his people, not so much with the aim of offering advice or
eliciting hollow laughter, but to point out the serious social and political
problems which, as will be explained below, his country was
experiencing when the play was written.

To analyze Antígona-Humor and understand the complexity
concealed behind its deceptive flippancy, it is essential to consider it in
association with the historical moment that gave rise to it, which was
one of the most troublesome and violent moments in the recent history
of the Dominican Republic. As noted in the published text, Antígona-
Humor was broadcast on radio in Belgium (in French) on February 7,
1965, and premiered in Santo Domingo under the direction of
Domínguez himself on September 14, 1968. According to his online
biography, in 1965—a particularly problematic year in Dominican
politics—Domínguez was “Director de Información y Prensa de la
Presidencia” (Information and Press Director for the Presidency),
without specifying whose presidency. It is obvious that Domínguez was
involved in what was happening in the country and that when writing a
text based on Sophocles’ Antigone, he would not have left out the
political dimension so central to this myth. Nevertheless, García claims

Antígona-Humor es una pieza bien hecha cuyo único propósito es
entretenir al público que asiste a su representación, provocando
ligera a los espectadores al insertar el desorden dentro del
núcleo familiar burgués, solo para reconfortarlos con un final
optimista en que se restablecen el bienestar y la armonía, y se
reafirman los valores tradicionales. (20–21)

(Antígona-Humor is a well-written piece of work whose sole
purpose is to entertain the audience attending its performance,
gently inviting spectators to enter into the disorder inside the
bourgeois nuclear family, only to reassure them with an optimistic
ending in which well-being and harmony are restored, and
traditional values are reaffirmed.)

A brief digression is needed here to offer a more detailed
explanation of the historical moment in which Antígona-Humor was
written. Neil Lazarus describes the situation at the international level
toward the end of the 1960s was as follows:

The anti-depression policies followed by most governments
produced inflation, without adequately stimulating the economy,
thus provoking high levels of unemployment. Throughout the
developing world the recession had damaging effects: it aggravated
the chronic deficits of its balance of payments by bringing down the prices of raw material and raising the prices of oil and other essential imports, thus producing inflation, unemployment and stagnation. This marked the beginning of the huge expansion of the Third World’s international debt, which soon became an impossibly heavy burden for its weak economy. (7–8)

In spite of its violent consequences, the death of Rafael L. Trujillo in 1961 gave the Dominican Republic its first chance of freedom in almost four decades. In December 1962, the first free elections were held, which were won by the writer Juan Bosch Gaviño. Among other reformist initiatives, Bosch was in favor of an agrarian reform that would have inevitably been detrimental to sugar mill owners. Bosch’s policies were aimed at improving the living conditions of the underprivileged sector of Dominican society, which, according to Néstor Rodríguez, “was surviving in the most extreme poverty.” This was why the United States government feared that a regime resembling Fidel Castro’s would emerge on the island. The business and religious sectors railed against Bosch’s policies, as they sought to preserve their hegemony inside the circle of power. Hoffnung-Garskof suggests that, in the end, “a stable, anticomunist regime was more important to liberals in Washington than a democratic one” (34).

The political situation led to a civil war, which the then-US President, Lyndon Johnson, sought to mitigate by sending in around 23,000 marines. The level of US involvement in the Dominican conflict is revealed in a quote taken by Alan McPherson from the recently disclosed conversations between President Johnson and Thomas Mann, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, two days after the 1965 crisis began:

JOHNSON. We’re going to have to really set up that government down there and run it and stabilize it some way or other. This Bosch is no good . . .
MANN. He’s no good at all . . . If we don’t get a decent government in there, Mr. President, we get another Bosch. It’s just going to be another sinkhole.
JOHNSON. Well, that’s what you ought to do. That’s your problem. You better figure it out.
MANN. The man to get back, I think, is Balaguer. He’s the one that ran way ahead in the polls. (136)

It was in the context of this “political meddling by the United States,” which “catapulted Joaquín Balaguer to the presidency of the country” in 1966, that, as Rodríguez notes, “la más cruenta represión hacia la militancia izquierdista que ha conocido la historia dominicana” (the bloodiest repression of leftist militants ever known in Dominican history) (Rodríguez) was unleashed.
I have offered this rough outline of the historical context to highlight the fact that, while Antígona-Humor was being broadcast on radio in Europe, back in the Dominican Republic the conditions were emerging that would lead to armed conflict over change and progress. The play finally premiered in Santo Domingo just two years after a fragile stability had been achieved, but with a continuing latent threat to anyone who openly dissented against the Balaguer regime.

US imperialism achieved its aim, and relations between the two countries were given a clean bill of health. It was in this context that Domínguez staged a play not about the origins and fate of a Dominican family caught up in the political turmoil, but about an upper middle class marriage which appears to be completely disconnected from the reality that has been afflicting the island, and which delights in its own illusions and petty bourgeois problems. Domínguez was making a veiled criticism of what was happening in his country, because the prevailing repressive climate did not allow anyone to make open criticisms without risking exile—or an even worse fate.

Before turning to my analysis of the play, I will offer a brief synopsis of its plot. The action takes place in the attic of the house of Enrique and Ingrid. Enrique has just been elected “Presidente de la Sociedad Pro Bienestar y Armonía de la Familia” (President of the Society for Family Welfare and Harmony), and is preparing his speech to accept this most honorable office. Ingrid, his wife, is an actress who retired from the stage after her wedding, but who will now make her triumphant return with the role that had been her greatest success, Antigone, at a charity performance for the Ladies’ Club of which she is a member. Enrique cannot attend because he needs to finish his speech, and the ladies of the club, fully in keeping with the lack of organization that characterizes Latin American countries, changed the date of the premiere without prior notice. Ingrid describes Antigone as her “favorite tragedy,” and claims that “el New York Times dijo que parecía como si Sofocles hubiese escrito Antígona para mí. ¿Te imaginas? Sofocles nació en el año 496 antes de Jesucristo, y escribió una tragedia pensando, de seguro, en mí” (the New York Times said that it seemed as if Sophocles had written Antigone for me. Can you imagine? Sophocles was born in 496 B.C., and he wrote a tragedy, beyond any doubt, with me in mind). Over the course of the play, Ingrid identifies herself with Antigone as she quotes some of the character’s speeches when she wishes to defend her brother, Pepe, who has come to seek refuge in the couple’s home to recover from a broken heart (he had been courting a wealthy young woman who, in Enrique’s opinion, realized that Pepe was after her money):

INGRID. ¿No comprendes, Enrique, que Pepe busca en nosotros el cariño que le ha negado Yolanda? Yolanda fue cruel con él, negándole su amor.
ENRIQUE. . . . Lo que Yolanda le negó no fue su amor, sino la administración de su dinero. (92)

(INGRID. Don’t you understand, Enrique, that Pepe is looking to us for the affection that Yolanda denied him? Yolanda was cruel to him, refusing to give him her love.
ENRIQUE. What Yolanda refused to give him wasn’t her love, but control of her money.)

Pepe’s presence has upset the tranquility of the whole family. Pepe listens to rock music at full volume, does not respect anyone’s privacy and dresses in his brother-in-law’s shirts whenever he pleases. Enrique has moved his office to the attic to escape from Pepe, but even here he cannot find peace. Miguelito, Enrique and Ingrid’s son, has also taken refuge in the attic, and soon all of the characters will converge on this newly discovered space, each one with a different agenda. Ingrid wants to rehearse her lines, Enrique to write his speech, Miguelito to take a nap. The phone rings constantly as Enrique needs to remind his mother to take her pills, and she in turn calls him to pressure him to get a divorce. Pepe, meanwhile, comes up to the attic for the first time in search of his weights, but when he finds an imported vintage wine that his brother-in-law has hidden in his desk (a special gift for someone Enrique wants to impress), his objective changes. Pepe’s effrontery forces Enrique to turn into a kind of Creon. Meanwhile, Ingrid seizes her role of Antigone to defend her brother, whom she views as innocent, although she is also annoyed by his attitude. The conflict intensifies until Enrique hits Pepe (when the latter has gotten drunk on the priceless vintage wine) and asks Ingrid for a divorce. It is then that they realize that Miguelito is nowhere to be found. Terrified, they believe he has been kidnapped, but in the end it turns out that the child has simply fallen asleep while trying to escape the chaos and recover from the sleeplessness he’s been suffering from since his uncle came to live with them. Pepe’s ex-girlfriend then calls him to seek reconciliation and invites him to meet her in Puerto Rico. Balance is restored in the family. Ingrid decides that she won’t act again because her son needs her attention, and everyone lives happily ever after—even Enrique’s mother, who has pressured her son so much to get a divorce but is horrified when she hears that he is actually thinking of doing it.

Domínguez effectively demystifies Antigone and uses her as a tangential figure through whom he can explore and question his country’s situation from a safe distance. When defining the demystification of heroes such as Antigone, Iani del Rosario Moreno suggests that the protagonist lives in a reality that corresponds to a particular historical moment, whether in a contemporary environment or in a nation’s past: “this character has a mixture of the features of myth and of the story of this nation” (115). In Antígona-humor, all the characters live in the exact historical moment in which the play was
written, and the way in which they behave and react clearly corresponds to their privileged social status. But they are not altogether untouched by the violence that lurks outside the safety of their home. Some of the monologues from Sophocles’ Antigone that Ingrid quotes in the play speak of the oppression and desperation that prevail under violent regimes like those of Creon or Balaguer. Ingrid declares: “Quien viva, como yo, Creonte, en medio de tantas desgracias, ¿cómo no lleva ganancia en la muerte?” (114) (For whoso lives, as I, in many woes, how can it be but death shall bring him gain?). This statement could be directly related to the political crimes and the hundreds of disappearances and murders suffered on the island, but Domínguez chose to veil it behind the superficiality of the conflicts of this fictional family in order to escape censorship. Nevertheless, the condemnation is present. Later, Ingrid rebukes her husband: “Ningún derecho tienes a privarme de los míos” (118) (You have no right to keep me from mine own). She says this, of course, to prevent Enrique from kicking Pepe out of the house, but the quote has a local resonance because Balaguer’s government, in its constant persecution, was violently eliminating all its opponents and, in doing so, keeping many Dominican families from their own. When Miguelito disappears, Ingrid immediately exclaims: “¡Miguelito ha sido raptado!” (119) (My Miguelito has been abducted!). This is a clear allusion to the danger present in the outside world, where anybody could disappear without a trace. Domínguez’s criticism is discreet, and disguised under jests and laughter, but this does not make it any less a condemnation.

The Dominican population—including the audience attending the performance of Antígona-Humor in Santo Domingo—would have been familiar with what Moya Pons calls “el clima de terror” (climate of terror), which was imposed by the military, Balaguer’s political supporters and paramilitary forces, and which systematically repressed the opposition parties-regardless of their political leanings (Pons 538). Indeed, in the first years of the regime the repression was quite violent. Regarding this violence Moya Pons adds that, in order to make the role of the regular armed forces appear less obvious, Balaguer allowed the organization of a paramilitary group called La Banda (The Band), paid with funds from military intelligence agencies. In order to dissociate them publicly from the actions of his own paramilitary forces, and to intimidate the population even more, in his speeches Balaguer referred to such right-wing terrorist groups as “uncontrollable forces” (Pons 538).

Hence, Ingrid’s fear for the safety of her son is not unfounded; the fear that both she and Enrique show in this scene is legitimate, and the audience would have been able to identify with it:

ENRIQUE. Yo, personalmente, voy a buscar a mi hijo hasta el fin del mundo
INGRID. (yendo ahora hacia él, angustiada): ¡Yo voy contigo!
(121)
(ENRIQUE. I shall go myself, to search for my son to the ends of
the earth.
INGRID. [going towards him now, angst-ridden]: And I shall go
with you!)

On the other hand, the other events that unfold in the plot and
the defense that Ingrid makes of her brother say much about that particular
historical moment in the Dominican Republic, and the political and
social consciousness of the elite. In this regard, it is worth considering
the words of Frantz Fanon, who in The Wretched of the Earth suggests
that decolonization is always a violent phenomenon, which basically
involves the replacement of “certain ‘species’ of men by other ‘species’
of men. Without any period of transition, there is total, complete, and
absolute substitution... To tell the truth, the proof of success lies in a
whole social structure being changed from the bottom up... Decolonization... sets out to change the order of the world”
(Lazarus 163–64). The Dominican Civil War was the result of efforts to
restore the presidency to Bosch, who had been democratically elected
and sought to bring about a kind of decolonization of the island,
distancing the government from the practices of Trujillo and separating
it from the US model. But the country’s business, military and religious
factions were not ready for such a dramatic change to their structures.
They chose instead to move from the long Trujillo dictatorship to a
regime that effectively prolonged it and brought with it a new US
colonization. According to Pons, Balaguer would speak of the
“geopolitical destiny” of the Dominican Republic, which meant that the
country would forever remain a satellite of the United States, because
the US government “would not allow another Cuba in the Caribbean.”
Balaguer’s statements, Pons explains, were shared by many on the
island, whose people “remembered that the United States had occupied
the country in 1916 and had governed it for eight years” (547).
Decolonization—and, with it, freedom—for the country became
impossible, and both the Balaguer regime and the pro-US policies that
had brought him to power had the complicity of the wealthy classes,
who did not want to lose their properties or see their fortunes
diminished. Years later, Balaguer’s refusal to accept the results of the
elections that stripped him of power in 1978 revealed clearly what
Dominicans already knew: that his government had been a prolongation
of the Trujillo era, “and that his political mentality had never been
democratic” (Moya Pons 549).

Fanon suggests that “the unpreparedness of the educated classes, the
lack of practical links between them and the mass of people, their
laziness and, let it be said, their cowardice at the decisive moment of the
struggle will give rise to tragic mishaps” (119). In Antígona-Humor,
everything that Fanon criticizes is present in the characters that make up
Enrique’s family, but what Fanon refers to as “tragic mishaps” occur outside the theater, in the real world. The ancient Greeks themselves actually kept the violent events that filled their dramatic works offstage, and the audience would hear of them through a report made by one of the characters or by the chorus leader. In this case, it is taken as given that the audience members know of the “tragic mishaps” occurring every day in their streets, and the action onstage is limited to the trivialities that affect the characters directly, in order to accentuate their lack of concern for—and their disconnection from—the political and social situation that surrounds them.

Moreover, Fanon argues, “the national bourgeoisie turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its underdeveloped country, and tends to look towards the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance” (133). In connection with Fanon’s statements, as will be discussed, Ingrid and Pepe display a clear fascination for all things American, this new “mother country” that is the source of the economic system that allows them to live the carefree lifestyle they do, even while the country has just emerged from a civil war and most of the population is suffering from severe shortages.

The lack of connection to the masses—who cannot afford the luxury of concerning themselves with superficialities, as they are too preoccupied with the daily struggle to survive—is evident in Domínguez’s play. Except for a fleeting reference to the maid who works for them, there is no allusion whatsoever to anybody outside the immediate social circle of the characters. Because their house is so big that it not only has a garden, but even has an attic, it is clear from the beginning that they belong to a privileged minority.

Pepe, to begin with, is the very personification of idleness. He has no job and no interest in finding one. He spends his time doing exercise to keep fit and listening to music at full volume. He appears to subscribe to the old concept of work that etymologically carries a connotation of pain and suffering (the Latin word *tripalium*, the name for a kind of instrument of torture, is the origin of the word *tripalliare*, meaning to endure painful exertion [Maravall 12], which in turn is the Spanish word for work, *trabajo*). Meanwhile, a cowardly failure to take action at decisive moments is evident in Enrique, who instead of restraining his brother-in-law from the beginning, allows him to take possession of his home and of his wardrobe without protest, just to keep from upsetting his wife.

The family that Domínguez presents us with in *Antígona-Humor* is “the result of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class, of its spiritual penury, and of the profoundly cosmopolitan mould that its mind is set in” (Fanon 119). This is just what García identifies in his analysis when he refers to a “marked cultural otherness”: the US rock music that Pepe listens to, the references to foreigners that Enrique mentions in his speech (the astronauts Yuri Gagarin and Alan B. Shepard) or Ingrid’s
fixation with Sophocles’ *Antigone*, the *New York Times* and Broadway. Even the attic as the setting for the action is a sign of this otherness; Dominican houses don’t have attics, and thus there is an appropriation even of US architecture, in which attics are common. Such elements, notes García, reflect “the cultural dependency in Latin American societies sustained by the imposition of foreign models by hegemonic power groups, accepted without question by socioeconomic groups such as those represented by the characters in the play” (25). This assertion is supported by Fanon, who argues that “the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of the bourgeoisie of the West” (123). In the specific case of this family, the US influence is clear, and as such constitutes a subtle stab on the part of Domínguez, given that the United States manipulated the politics of his country and invaded the island, and had now successfully infiltrated the consciousness of the members of the powerful classes to such an extent that they were ignorant of the reality that surrounded them, or so enclosed in their circle of power, comfort and abundance that they could not see it.

On July 1, 1966, when he took power, Balaguer offered a speech in which he warned that “cualquiera que intente fomentar el odio entre las diferentes clases sociales y esparcir la división y la cizaña en el seno de la familia dominicana, nos encontrará de frente, dispuestos a encarar todos los peligros” (anyone who attempts to foment hatred between the different social classes and spread division and discord in the heart of the Dominican family, will have to deal with us, who are ready to face any danger). Present at the inauguration ceremony was the US vice president, Hubert Humphrey. It was clear that the country would be watched closely and that any sense of freedom was illusory; the nation was controlled by a government that had declared open war on dissidence, and that had in the US regime an accomplice to its criminal repression. What greater division could there be in a nation than a division fostered by a government that accuses, persecutes, arrests and kills with total impunity? What greater division than the yawning gap between rich and poor—especially when the poor and their suffering seem not to exist at all? Faced with the impossible task of addressing the first of these questions in his play, given the climate of danger and repression existing on the island, Domínguez presents his audience with a household as invaded as his country. In this case, it is the protagonist’s brother who is the invader. In this house there is nowhere else to go to escape the invader other than the attic, where they all take refuge—unsuccessfully, because Pepe, with his love of rock’n’roll, the twist, and bodybuilding, has invaded every room of Enrique and Ingrid’s house, and whenever he discovers a new space to occupy, he takes it over as well.

The character of Pepe could be read as a double metaphor: on the one hand, he embodies the worst qualities of the bourgeoisie and, on the other, he personifies the US invader who has arrived to destabilize the
family. The character of Enrique is forced to act as a small-scale Creon because he doesn’t want to make his wife suffer. The fact that the play begins with Enrique’s speech, however, brings Balaguer to mind, as the latter delivered speeches to the Dominican people on radio and television on a regular basis. I have found no archival material discussing the staging of the 1968 production, but it would have been sufficient for the actor playing Enrique to have imitated Balaguer’s way of speaking a little to make the mockery added to the indictment clear while still escaping the censors, as the script makes no allusion against the president. However, one difference between Enrique and Balaguer must be acknowledged: while Enrique opposes the invader, Balaguer not only welcomed him but owed his time in power to him. The president assisted, permitted, and promoted the ideological and military invasion that destabilized the country that it was his duty to defend. Enrique is a better leader and defender of his territory and his people: he complains, defends himself, opposes and, in the end, is ready to leave rather than to consent to constant humiliation.

As for the character of Ingrid, she may operate as a metaphor for the island under the new oppressive regime: seduced by the obvious US symbols of Broadway and Hollywood; defending her brother and his invasion; and clearly indifferent to the needs of her son Miguelito, who may well represent the defenseless sectors of the population, deprived of his peace, with no protection or guidance, left to his fate within the walls of the home he inhabits.

When it is time to give the child a snack, Ingrid tells him to ask the maid “to give you ice cream and cake” (102). As briefly mentioned before, this is the only allusion made to the domestic servants that the family have in their house. Domínguez has stated his intention in this respect in an interview:

Trato de no utilizar personajes que estén de más en las obras. Muy raro que en una obra mía aparezcan niños o que aparezcan sirvientes. Es decir, trato de evitar todos esos personajes que tradicionalmente en las obras españolas son muy frecuentes y lo que hacen es aumentar el reparto de una obra y a veces no juegan ningún papel como caracteres, y entonces trato de que cada personaje que aparezca en una obra mía tenga cierta importancia. (Zalacaín 109)

(I try not to use characters that are superfluous in my plays. It is very rare for children or servants to appear in one of my works. I mean, I try to avoid all those characters that traditionally in Spanish plays are so common and who increase the cast of a play and sometimes have no role as characters, and so I try to ensure that each character who appears in one of my works has a certain importance.)
Nevertheless, in this play in particular, where the character of the child proves extremely important, the absence of the maid lends itself to another interpretation. She is an anonymous character, invisible, not only because the author opted for a small cast, but because the masses, in the eyes of the upper classes, are anonymous and invisible. Miguelito, meanwhile, eats ice cream and cake at a time when the austerity measures imposed by Balaguer’s government had especially affected the marginalized sectors of society due to the rise in the prices of basic necessities. This austerity did not affect bourgeois families. The lack of connection to the reality of the vast majority of the country’s population is clear, and Domínguez exposes it here. One of the few allusions to justice in the text is made by Enrique while defending himself to Ingrid, who accuses him of being unjust to her brother. Enrique asserts: “Justice is a very broad term; let’s examine it thoroughly and we’ll see how unjust we all are” (120).

All in all, what happens in this family is what was happening to the nation. On the one hand, they are invaded and have no escape, peace, or tranquility in their own house, and on the other, the only thing the characters are interested in is defending their own interests, with no concern for achieving a unity based on stability and productivity. The fact that they are physically holed up in the attic—the highest spot in the house—underlines their inability to put their feet on the ground, both literally and metaphorically speaking. The balance is restored only when the invader announces his departure. If this family is an allegory for Dominican society, Domínguez suggests that stability will only be restored with the end of the US intervention—and the internal squabbles—and when those who dwell in the house recognize themselves as a single entity capable of living united and in harmony.

If, as Idelber Avelar asserts, the tragedies of Sophocles “gave signs of a paradigm that later became dominant: the understanding of truth as unveiling, dragging, and bringing to light something hidden” (29), Domínguez’s comedy unveils its own truth: the dysfunctional nature of Enrique and Ingrid’s family, which is the dysfunctional nature of Dominican society. Enrique has been appointed “President of the Society for Family Welfare and Harmony,” but his own family is far from well and certainly not harmonious. Both he and Ingrid neglect Miguelito to such an extent that they do not realize when he disappears; they never know where he is, and when they find him it is only by accident.

Pepe, whom Ingrid accords the protection that she should be giving her son, is a worthy representative of the national bourgeoisie as defined by Fanon: “not engaged in production, nor in invention, nor building, nor labour” (120). Ingrid is determined to feel pity for Pepe and the sorrow he displays over the loss of Yolanda. Given her role as protagonist in a Greek tragedy, it is ironic that she forgets that Aristotle defined the pity we feel for another as “the emotion that we owe only to those enduring undeserved misfortune” (Sontag 75), and Pepe surely
deserves the rejection he received from the woman whose fortune he was chasing.

The punching attack Enrique launches against Pepe when the latter is drunk reveals his impotence, but is also evidence that the head of the household has felt his power undermined and is trying to do something about it. Hannah Arendt suggests that power has a tendency, or a need, to grow. If it does not grow, it weakens, and any loss of power is an open invitation to violence (87). Enrique resorts to violence in a desperate effort to preserve his power as leader of the family and the household. But in the end, Pepe leaves, not because his brother-in-law has kicked him out, but because reconciliation with Yolanda requires him to leave not only the city but the country. And this may also be a reflection of what happens among members of Dominican society in privileged economic conditions: as soon as the local situation turns adverse or unfavorable, they emigrate —as they actually did during the 1960s, mostly to Puerto Rico but also to the continental United States. Domínguez’s criticism of the middle and upper classes of his country in this play is concealed behind a veil of humor, but it is nevertheless a forceful indictment.

In an effort to explain why Domínguez chose the genre of comedy, rather than tragedy as most Latin American playwrights who have attempted a re-writing of the Antigone myth have done, I would propose two possibilities. The first is that the play, to make its criticism more scathing while still concealing it from the eyes of the censors and oppressors, reflects the image of the country that the government wishes to convey: that of a family living in prosperity and concerned with trivialities, because all important matters have been resolved. Balaguer’s government was vehemently determined to support urban growth with visible projects that could be used as part of its propaganda. This rapid growth led to the construction of new urban developments where the families of the privileged classes could move “into a landscape of large avenues, quiet streets, parks, fancy social clubs, high-rise hotels, and air-conditioned commercial plazas” (Hoffnung-Garskof 37). Enrique’s family might well live in one of these new houses and belong to the social group that benefited so greatly by Balaguer’s urban expansion initiatives.

The second answer I would propose to the above question can be found in the introduction to La isla que se repite by Antonio Benítez Rojo. In this book, the author recalls how, when there was a threat of nuclear catastrophe in Cuba, when the children had been evacuated and a deathly silence pervaded the streets, he looked out his window to find the following scene:

Dos negras pasaron ‘de cierta manera’ bajo mi balcón. Me es imposible describir esta ‘cierta manera’. Solo diré que había un polvillo dorado y antiguo entre sus piernas nudosas, un olor de albahaca y hierbabuena en sus vestidos, una sabiduría simbólica,
ritual, en sus gestos y en su chachareo. Entonces supe de golpe que no ocurriría el apocalipsis. Esto es: las espadas y los arcángeles y las trompetas y las bestias y las estrellas caídas y la ruptura del último sello no iban a ocurrir. Nada de eso iba a ocurrir por la sencilla razón de que el Caribe no es un mundo apocalíptico. La noción del apocalipsis no ocupa un espacio importante de su cultura. . . . En Chicago, un alma desgarrada dice: ‘I can’t take it any more’, y se da a las drogas o a la violencia más desesperada. En La Habana se diría: ‘lo que hay que hacer es no morirse,’ o bien, ‘aquí estoy, jodido pero contento’. (xiii–xiv)

(Two black women walked by ‘in a certain way’ under my balcony. It is impossible for me to describe this ‘certain way.’ I can only say that there was an ancient gold dust between their gnarled legs, a scent of basil and peppermint in their clothes and a symbolic, ritual wisdom in their gestures and in their chatter. Then at once I knew that the apocalypse would not come. I mean, the swords and archangels and trumpets and beasts and falling stars and the breaking of the seventh seal was not going to happen. None of this would occur for the simple reason that the Caribbean is not an apocalyptic world. The notion of apocalypse does not occupy an important position in its culture. . . . In Chicago, a lost soul cries: ‘I can’t take it anymore,’ and turns to drugs or violence in utter desperation. In Havana, such a soul would say: ‘the important thing is to keep from dying,’ or ‘here I am, screwed, but happy.’)

Perhaps the fear of censorship and the risk entailed in making an open condemnation was not the only reason that Domínguez decided not to reformulate a tragic Antigone; perhaps he also felt that audiences in his country would not identify with this genre, in view of the tragedies that occurred on a daily basis in the streets of the island. Perhaps he decided to write his play in this “certain way” so that its target audience—obviously made up of people of the middle and upper classes of the Dominican Republic, who had and still have the means and interest to attend the theater—could see themselves in a mirror in which their image was not so different from their reality. A mirror in which life is still comfortable, where there is no privation, where the US influence is even enjoyed and the oppression is overlooked, because that oppression is directed at other people, not at the bourgeoisie aligned with the powers that be. But looking closely, the mirror offered by Domínguez has inverted the order of the perceptions, because it seems to say, in a reversal of the words of Benítez Rojo: yes, we look happy, but we are screwed.

Dominican capitalism was created and nurtured during the Balaguer regime, and with it began a social schism that was aggravated after the imposition of the neoliberal model adopted in the 1980s, which has augmented the class division and impoverished those who formerly
belonged to the middle class. *Antígona-Humor* reflects the beginning of the social division of the Dominican population and the defenselessness of the individual in the face of the aggression surrounding him, whether in the form of an oppressive regime like Balaguer’s or an economic system that likewise offers no escape. Whether characters like Enrique, Ingrid and Pepe would have had the good fortune of remaining untouched by the social, economic, and political problems pervading their country is a question that remains unanswered. Domínguez criticizes the violence not only of the political regime in power at the time the play was written, but also of an economic system that compels the population to be suspicious and mistrusting of others (as are Enrique and Ingrid when they assume their son has been kidnapped) and which, instead of bringing the country together, only deepens its divisions. This is one of the most ghastly consequences of the economic system adopted on the island, and the object of Franklin Domínguez’s central criticism in *Antígona-Humor*.

Notes

1. To outline the news and events of relevance to the social and political issues at the heart of my analysis, I will draw from the newspaper archival data published in Fernando Infante’s historical chronology titled *12 años de Balaguer*. On August 3, 1968, the daily newspaper *El Caribe* published an article reporting that approximately 600,000 people were living in poverty in the Dominican Republic, according to a UNESCO study (118). On August 16, the newspaper quoted the Minister of the Interior and Police as stating that a heavy military presence in the streets of the capital “is aimed at preventing any outbreak of street disorder” (119). On September 4, a mere few weeks before the premiere of *Antígona-Humor* in Santo Domingo, Alfredo Peña, a captain in the National Army, was shot dead “while on his way to the Fortaleza Ozama, where the command headquarters he was in charge of was stationed” (121). On the front page of the paper on September 12 was an article discussing the great notoriety acquired by the case of a female resident of Nagua, who died “from a beating delivered by a soldier. The governor of the province fears for her life because she has been threatened by the local army captain; and in the face of this threat she announced that she would not leave her house until President Balaguer’s promises of justice and clarification of the case are fulfilled” (121). During this same period, Juan Bosch was traveling to different countries in the communist bloc in search of support. As can be observed, relations between the Dominican public and the military factions were not positive. Distrust and a climate of violence and volatility prevailed. This was the sociopolitical situation when Domínguez’s *Antígona* was being staged. In light of these events, added to the Dominican civil war of 1965, the US military intervention, and the widespread repression which, as will be shown in this paper, characterized Balaguer’s twelve years in power, it is easy to understand why Domínguez opted to subvert the myth and turn his play into a comedy which, on face value, would pass any censor review, allowing its free performance, and would even seem inoffensive to the regime.

2. In April 1965, the Dominican Republic erupted into civil war, when “a democratic wing of the military and the leadership of Bosch’s party, the Partido
Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD), tried to put Bosch back into power without new elections” (Hoffnung-Garskof 35). Bosch was democratically elected in 1962, after the fall of the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in 1961, but he was deposed in 1963. Donald Reid Cabral, who had been in power since June 1964, was removed from office, replaced by a Military Junta headed by Pedro Bartolomé Benoît, who remained in command for a mere six days, from May 1 to May 7, 1965. Francisco Caamaño Detí then took over the country until September 3. Héctor García Godoy was then sworn in as provisional president, a position he held until the elections of July 1, 1966, when Joaquín Balaguer, amid accusations of electoral fraud, assumed power as permanent president, remaining in office for the following twelve years (information taken from the website on the Dominican Civil War, and the documentary by René Fortunato).

3. See Fortunato.

4. Throughout this essay, I use the word island to refer to the Dominican Republic exclusively, even though it is one of two countries sharing the same island. I use this word because it’s the one Dominicans themselves use when referring to their own country.

5. Johnson not only sent soldiers but also extended the US presence on several other fronts. According to Frank Moya Pons, in 1966, when Balaguer assumed the presidency, “theDominican government was controlled by some 400 US officials and advisers working at nearly every level of public administration. The armed forces were practically managed by the US military team made up of seventy-five advisers. The Ministry of Agriculture was controlled by forty-five US experts, who made almost all the decisions. The National Police and security forces were advised by fifteen public security experts, one third of whom belonged to the CIA” (542–43). The presence of these advisers is explained, adds Moya, by the fact that “for many months the continued existence of the Dominican government depended [on them]. The civil war had created such a power vacuum that tax revenues had practically dried up because none of the governments during the conflict had been able to collect taxes.” Without this intervention, the crisis on the island would have been not only political and social, but economic as well, with consequences so serious that, according to Moya, “it would have been totally paralyzed” (543).

6. According to René Fortunato’s documentary, between 1966 and 1969 there were 366 deaths and disappearances, in addition to constant arbitrary arrests and illegal raids. By 1974, the total number of deaths reached 3,000.

7. For the English versions of the quotes from Antigone, I’ve used the translation of Edward Plumptre, which is the most widely published version in English. As a result, the quotes may diverge slightly from the Spanish versions that Domínguez quotes in his play.

8. Enrique writes in his speech: “¿Por qué, si Alan B. Shepard pudo mantenese en órbita durante quince minutos en una nave sideral, no puede el padre de familia mantener el bienestar y la armonía en la nave de su hogar? ¿No es aquella acción, señores, más difícil y, sin embargo, no fue acaso lograda? ¿Seamos todos un Shepard en nuestros hogares!” (97) (If Alan B. Shepard could stay in orbit for fifteen minutes in a spaceship, why can’t a father maintain welfare and harmony in the ship of his family home? Is not that, gentlemen, more difficult and, nevertheless, was it not achieved? Let us all be a Shepard in our own homes!).

9. See Fortunato.

10. According to Fortunato, Balaguer was careful to give importance to the figure of the woman within his government, and included women in his project as governors and councilors, and in other positions—but they had to submit to his authority just as Ingrid ultimately has to with Enrique.
11. There was little traffic between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic between 1930 and 1960, “however, following the overthrow of the Trujillo regime in 1961 people linked with that government such as members of the ruling class, conservative political leaders and government employees began leaving for Puerto Rico. Defusing political tensions in the Dominican Republic by moving dissidents to Puerto Rico even eventually became part of US foreign policy.” See “World Directory of Minorities,” http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5259&tmpl=printpage).

Works Cited


